

## Chapter 1

Five months before the beginning of that period of madness, that time of chaos and death that became known as the Gray Plague, the first of the strange meteors fell to Earth. It landed a few miles west of El Paso, Texas, on the morning of March 11th.

Maimed and captive, in the depths of an interplanetary meteor-craft, lay the only possible savior of plague-ridden Earth.

In a few hours a great throng of people gathered around the dully smoldering mass of fire-pitted rock, the upper half of which protruded from the Earth where it had buried itself, like a huge, roughly outlined hemisphere. And then, when the crowd had assumed its greatest proportions, the meteor, with a mighty, Earth-shaking roar, exploded.

A vast flood of radiance, more brilliant than the light of the sun, lit up the sky for miles around. One moment, a throng of curious people, a number of scientists, newspaper men—a crashing explosion—

and then a great, yawning pit sending forth a blinding radiance! Destruction and death where life had been.

The brilliant light streamed from the pit for about ten minutes; then like a snuffed-out candle flame, it vanished.

The second of the strange meteors landed on the evening of March 13th, in the city of Peking, China. It demolished several buildings, and buried itself beneath the ruins. The Chinese, unaware of the tragedy at El Paso, gathered in the vicinity, and when the meteor exploded at about ten o'clock that night, were instantly destroyed. As in Texas, the great pit emitted a cloud of dazzling light for about ten minutes, throwing a brilliant glow over the city and its surroundings; then was extinguished.

The people of the world awoke to the fact that events worthy of more than passing interest were occurring. The press of every nation began giving the strange meteors more and more publicity. Statements of different pseudo-scientists were published in

explanation of the meteor's origin, statements that aroused world wide conjecture.

Approximately twenty-four hours after the falling of the second missile, the third one fell, landing near Madrid, Spain. The Spaniards, having received news of the El Paso and Peking tragedies, avoided the ugly mass of rock as though it were a dreaded pestilence. In every way its action was similar to that of its two predecessors.

The interest of the world was doubled now. The unusual similarity of the action of the meteors, and the regularity of their landings, seemed indicative of a definite, hostile purpose behind it all. A menace from the unknown—a peril from the skies!

Scientists began giving serious consideration to the unusual phenomenon, pottering around in the pits, wearing airs of puzzlement. But their investigations were of no avail, for nothing of any great significance came to light through their efforts.

At about that time, an announcement was made that created a furor. Astronomers in different parts of the United States reported that they had observed a bright flare of light leaping up from the darkened portion of the planet Venus. The astronomers had no definite idea of anything of importance in back of what they had seen; but not so the masses. The flare, they said, was caused by the release of another meteor!

From Venus! Missiles, hurled by Venerians, menacing the Earth! The silver planet became the subject of universal discussion; innumerable fantastic articles about it appeared in magazine sections of Sunday newspapers. And the astronomers of Earth turned their telescopes toward Venus with an interest they had never felt before.

Four days of expectant waiting passed by after the third meteor had fallen, while interest continued mounting at an accelerating pace. And then, at about two o'clock in the morning of the 18th, three great observatories, two in North America and one in England, recorded the falling of an extraordinarily

large and unusually brilliant meteor that glowed with an intense, bluish-white light as it entered the Earth's atmosphere. And, unlike most meteors, this one was not consumed by its intense heat, but continued gleaming brilliantly until it vanished below the horizon. Simultaneous with the falling of the meteor, the Earth was rocked by one of the worst quakes in history.

Seismographs in all parts of the world recorded the tremors of the Earth, each indicating that the disturbance had occurred somewhere beneath the Atlantic ocean. Evidently the fourth meteor had fallen into the ocean, for the shaking of the Earth was obviously the result of the collision. That quakes had not followed the landing of the first three was due to the fact that they had been far smaller than the fourth.

And then, a short time after the earthquake, the worst storm in two hundred years broke over the Atlantic. Waves, mountain high, piled themselves upon each other in a wild frenzy; a shrieking wind lashed the waters into a liquid chaos. Great ocean-liners were

tossed about like tiny chips; an appalling number of smaller ships were lost in that insane storm.

Nor was the destruction confined to the sea, for all along the Atlantic coast of North America and Europe, mighty walls of water rushed in, and wrecked entire towns and cities.

Fortunately the storm was of short duration; a few hours after it began, it subsided.

For a number of weeks public attention was centered upon the meteors and storm; but gradually, when nothing further occurred, the fickle interest of the masses began to wane. A month after the storm, the strange meteors were no longer mentioned by the press, and consequently, had passed from the public mind. Only the astronomers remembered, keeping their telescopes trained on Venus night after night.

Four months passed by during which nothing of an unusual nature came to the attention of the world. But at the end of that time, it suddenly dawned upon those nations whose shores touched the Atlantic

ocean, that something extraordinary was happening. It was taking place so insidiously, so quietly, that it had attracted no great attention.

A series of inexplicable sea disasters had begun. Every ship that had traveled over a certain, regular steamship route, had disappeared, leaving no trace. Mysteriously, without warning, they had vanished; without a single S O S being sent, seven freighters had been lost. The disappearances had been called to the world's attention by the shipping companies, alarmed at the gradual loss of their boats.

Then other mysterious vanishings came to the attention of the world. Ships in all parts of the Atlantic were being lost. When this fact became known, trans-Atlantic commerce ceased almost overnight. With the exception of a few privately owned yachts and freighters, the Atlantic became deserted.

And finally, a few days after the world became aware of the strange disappearances on the Atlantic, the Gray Plague introduced itself to humanity. Attempts were made to repress the facts: but the tragedy of the

freighter, *Charleston*, in all its ghastliness and horror, became known in spite of all attempts at secrecy.

On the morning of August 3rd, the *Charleston* was found, half buried in the sand of a beach on the coast of Florida, cast there, evidently, by a passing storm. The freighter had been one of the first boats to disappear.

When the ship's discoverers boarded her, their eyes were greeted by a sight whose ghastliness filled them with a numbing horror. Indeed, so terrifying was the spectacle on the *Charleston*, that the discoverers, four boys of adolescent age, left in fear-stricken haste. Nor could they be induced to return to the ship's deck.

Later, a group of men from a nearby town boarded the freighter to investigate the boys' amazing report. In the group was a newspaper reporter who chanced to be in the vicinity on a minor story. It was through the reporter's account that the facts became known as quickly as they did.



When the men clambered up the side of the *Charleston* to her deck, they saw a spectacle the like of which had never before been seen on Earth. Although they had been prepared for the horror to some extent by the story of the boys, the sight on the *Charleston* exceeded their description to such a degree that, for the moment, the men were rendered speechless.

The deck of the *Charleston* was a shambles—a scene of sudden, chilling death. All about were strewn gray, lifeless bodies. Death had overtaken the crew in the midst of their duties, suddenly, without warning, it seemed. Bodies strewn about—yet nowhere was there sign of decay! Bodies, lifeless for days, or weeks—yet intact!

The men were fearfully impressed by the strangely grotesque positions of the corpses. With a few exceptions, they lay on the deck in abnormal, twisted masses of gray covered flesh. Somehow, they seemed flattened, as though they had been soft, jellylike, and had flowed, had settled, flat against the deck. Some were no more than three inches thick, and had spread

out to such an extent that they looked like fantastic caricatures of human bodies. That unnatural change in their structure, and the ghastly, dead-gray color of their skins gave the corpses a horrifying, utterly repulsive appearance that made the flesh of the men crawl.

The bodies had a strangely soft aspect, as though they were still jellylike. One of the men, bolder than the rest, touched a body—and withdrew his hand in revulsion and surprise. For the ugly mass was cold, and as hard as bone: the tissues of the flesh seemingly replaced by a solid, bony substance. Later investigation revealed that all the dead on the *Charleston* had assumed a similar, bonelike solidity.

When the men left the freighter to report the tragedy to the proper authorities, their faces were blanched, and their nerves badly shaken. Yet their horror was nothing when compared with what it would have been, had they known what was to follow.

Rapidly the story of the *Charleston* spread. By means of the press, over the radio, even by word of mouth,

the story of the horror on the freighter was given publicity. All over the United States and Canada it spread, and from thence to the rest of the world. Eagerly was the story accepted: here, at last, was the explanation of the sea disasters! And then, more than ever before, was the Atlantic ocean shunned.

The bodies of the seamen on the freighter were turned over to scientists for experimentation and research. It was thought that they might be able to discover the cause of the Gray Death, and with a knowledge of its cause, create something with which to free the Atlantic from its scourge.

The scientists' investigations only served to mystify the world to a greater degree. The only thing that came to light was the cause of the bodies' bonelike rigidity. In some inexplicable way the bones in the seamen had dissolved, and according to appearances, while the bodies were plastic, had flattened out. And then, strange and unnatural though it seemed, the calcium from the dissolved bones had gathered at the surface of each body, and combining with the flesh and skin, had formed the hard, bony shell that gave

them their ghastly grayness, and their appearance of petrification. Aside from this, the scientists learned nothing; the cause of this amazing phenomenon was a complete mystery to them.

Slowly, methodically, step by step, the unusual had been taking place. From the time of the landing of the first strange meteor, up to the discovery of the *Charleston*, there had been a gradual increase in the significance of each succeeding event.

Then finally came the climax: the Gray Plague itself. All that preceded it faded into significance before the horror of the dread pestilence that seized the world with its destroying talons.

A short time after the discovery of the *Charleston*, the Plague made its first appearance on land. Slowly, pitilessly, inexorably, it began, taking its toll all along the Atlantic coast. From Newfoundland to Brazil; from the British Isles to Egypt, wherever people lived near the ocean, thousands were stricken with the dread malady.

The old and infirm were the most quickly affected; their weakened bodies could not withstand the ravage of the Plague as could those of younger people. An old man, walking along a large thoroughfare in Savannah, Georgia, suddenly uttered a fearful shriek and sank to the pavement. While the pedestrians watched with bulging eyes, he seemed to shrink, to flatten, to flow liquidly, turning a ghastly gray. Within an hour he was as hard as the men of the *Charleston*. Of all the millions, perhaps he was the first.

Others followed in the wake of the first victim, young as well as old; three hours after the death in Savannah, every channel of communication was choked with news of a constantly increasing number of casualties. A Boston minister, preaching a funeral sermon, collapsing beside the coffin; a lineman on a telegraph pole, overcome, falling—and splashing! A thousand incongruous tragedies shocking humanity.

In Europe the action of the Plague was the same as in North America. Death stalking the sea-coast, destroying thousands; ignorant fishermen, men of

learning, women and children of every age—all were grist to be ground in the mill of the Gray Plague.

Before a week had gone by, no one remained alive in the villages, towns and cities all along the Atlantic. New York, London, all the large coast cities were deserted by the living, left to the rigid dead. From the largest metropolis to the smallest hamlet, all became body-glutted tombs.

And then, on the morning of October 12th, news was given to the world that threw mankind into a panic. The Plague was moving inland! Slowly, yet relentlessly it spread, no longer confining its effect to the sea-coast, but moving farther and farther inland toward the heart of the two continents, driving mankind before it. For people fled in insane terror before the advancing death. Nor was there escape from the menace—no antidote to counteract, no sanctuary wherein to hide.

To North and South, to East and West, the pestilence spread, destroying as it went. Unless there were some

miraculous intervention, the human race would be destroyed!

Officials of the world were at their wits' end; scientists threw up their hands in despair. The Plague was an insoluble puzzle—enigmatical, utterly inexplicable, beyond the knowledge of Earth.

Scientists and doctors were brutally slain during that period by fear-crazed mobs, because of their inability to rescue the world from the grip of the Plague. Thousands of people died while striving to escape from the Gray Death, crushed by passing motor vehicles, or starving in the congested areas. Gone was the boasted civilization of man—humanity sinking rapidly to the level of the beast; gone, destroyed in a few weeks!

And then one day when the end seemed perilously close, there was ushered into the presence of the remnant of the United States officials who had gathered in San Francisco, a twisted monstrosity of a man, fearfully scarred and deformed. He was closeted with them for two hours. At the end of that time an

excited official communicated with the leader of the American scientists.

"A cure for the Plague has been discovered!" he cried in joyful tones. "Man still has a chance!"

Before an hour had passed by, scientists were in possession of cultures of germs that would destroy the bacilli of the Gray Death. The hope of salvation restored some semblance of order; and in a very short time the development of the germs was going forward as rapidly as skilled bacteriologists could carry it. Forces of doctors were marshalled to administer the cure, inoculating all who were untouched by the Plague.

At about that time, a small, bronze-colored sphere arose into the air above San Francisco, and sped eastward with amazing velocity. It flashed over the United States, over the Atlantic ocean, and over western Europe, finally landing in the midst of the European hordes. There its operator, a deformed cripple, left bacteria similar to those he had given to the United States.



In a short time Europe, too, was busily engaged in developing the bacteria, and inoculating her people.

Many others died before the world was rendered immune, but at last mankind let its labors cease. The Gray Plague was overcome.

Then the work of reclaiming the deserted areas was begun; then, too, was started the ghastly task of disposing of the countless, rigid dead. And finally, a great steamer left New York harbor, and started across the Atlantic. It was the purpose of the men on board to destroy utterly the source of the Plague.

But long before that occurred, humanity had heard the story of Phillip Parkinson, the man who saved the world—had heard, and had honored the deliverer of mankind.

Parkinson's story follows:

## Chapter 2

The steam yacht, Diana, bound for the Azores and points south, was two days out from Miami when the great meteor fell into the Atlantic. On the after deck, leaning over the rail, watching the moonlit waters, stood Phillip Parkinson, owner of the yacht. A bacteriologist of international fame was Parkinson, on an early vacation to recuperate from the effects of a strenuous winter of research. Nervous, rather high-strung, he had been unable to sleep; at about one in the morning of the 18th of March, he had come up on deck.

He had stood there for about an hour when suddenly there appeared in the sky above him, a meteor, a great disc of blue-white incandescence. It seemed to be rushing straight down toward him; instinctively he leaped back, as though to avoid the fiery missile.

As the constantly expanding disc flashed through the hundred miles of Earth's atmosphere, the ocean, as far as eye could see, became as light as day. Bathed in that baleful, white glare, Parkinson, bewildered,

dazed, half-blinded, watched the approaching stellar visitant.

In a few moments it struck—no more than two miles away. In the last, bright flare of blue-white light, Parkinson saw a gigantic column of steam and boiling water leap up from the sea. Then thick, impenetrable darkness fell—darkness that was intensified by its contrast with the meteor's blinding light.

For ten tense, breathless seconds utter silence hung over the sea ... then, for those on the yacht, the world went mad! A shrill, unearthly shriek—the sound of the meteor's passage through the atmosphere; an ear-splitting roar, as of the simultaneous release of the thunder-drums of ages; a howling demon of wind; a solid wall of raging, swirling water of immeasurable height—all united in an indescribable chaos that bewildered those on board the Diana, and that lifted the yacht and—threw it upon its side!

When the first rushing mountain of lathering, thundering water crashed upon the yacht, Parkinson felt himself hurtling through the roaring air. For a

moment he heard the infernal pandemonium of noise ... then the strangling, irresistible brine closed over his head.

A blackness deeper than that of the night—and Parkinson knew no more....

Slowly consciousness returned to the bacteriologist. It came under the guise of a dull, yet penetrating throbbing coming from beneath the surface on which he lay. Vaguely he wondered at it; he had not yet entirely cast off the enshrouding stupor that gripped him.

Gradually he came into full possession of his faculties—and became aware of a dull aching throughout his entire body. In his chest it seemed to be intensified; every breath caused a sharp pang of pain.

Faltering and uncertain, he arose and peered around. Before, lay the open sea, calm now, and peaceful. Long, rolling swell swept in and dashed themselves against the rocks a few feet away. Rocks? For a moment Parkinson stared at the irregular shore-line

in dazed wonder. Then as his mind cleared, the strangeness of his position flashed upon him.

Solid earth was under his feet! Although he must be hundreds of miles from shore, in some way he had drifted upon land. So far as he knew, there were no islands in that part of the Atlantic; yet his very position belied the truth. He could not have drifted to the mainland; the fact that he was alive precluded all possibilities of that, for he would have drowned in far less time than the latter thought implied.

He turned and inspected the land upon which he had been cast. A small, barren island, bleak and inhospitable, and strangely metallic, met his gaze. The rays of the sun beating down upon it were thrown back with an uncomfortable intensity; the substance of the island was a lustrous, copperlike metal. No soil softened the harshness of the surface; indescribably rugged and pitted was the two hundred-foot expanse. It reminded Parkinson of a bronze relief-map of the moon.

For a moment he puzzled over the strangeness of the unnatural island; then suddenly he realized the truth. This was the meteor! Obviously, this was the upper side of the great sphere from space, protruding above the sea.

Fortunate for him that the meteor had not been completely covered by water, he thought—but was it fortunate? True, he was alive now, thanks to the tiny island, but how long would he remain alive without food or water, and without hope of securing either? Unless he would be picked up by a passing steamer, he would die a far more unpleasant death than that of drowning. Some miracle had saved him from a watery grave; it would require another to rescue him from a worse fate.

Even now he was beginning to feel thirsty. He had no way of determining how long he had been unconscious, but that it was at least ten hours, he was certain, for the sun had been at its zenith when he had awakened. No less than fifteen hours had gone by since water—other than that of the sea—had passed

his lips. And the fact that it was impossible for him to quench his thirst only served to render it more acute.

In order to take his mind from thoughts of his thirst and of the immediate future, he rapidly circled the island. As he had expected, it was utterly barren. With shoulders drooping in despair he settled wearily to a seat on the jagged mass of metal high up on top of the meteor.

An expression of sudden interest lit up his face. For a second time he felt that particular throbbing, that strange pulsing beneath the surface of the meteor. But now it was far more noticeable than before. It seemed to be directly below him, and very close to the surface.

Parkinson could not tell how long he sat there, but from the appearance of the sun, he thought that at the very shortest, an hour passed by while he remained on that spot. And during that time, the throbbing gradually increased until the metal began vibrating under his feet.

Suddenly the bacteriologist leaped aside. The vibrating had reached its height, and the meteor seemed to lurch, to tilt at a sharp angle. His leap carried him to firm footing again. And then, his thirst and hopeless position completely forgotten, Parkinson stared in fascination at the amazing spectacle before him.

An eighteen-foot disc of metal, a perfect circle, seemed to have been cut out of the top of the meteor. While he watched, it began turning slowly, ponderously, and started sinking into the meteor. As it sank, Parkinson fancied that it grew transparent, and gradually vanished into nothingness—but he wasn't sure.

A great pit, eighteen feet wide, but far deeper, lay before him in the very place where, not more than ten minutes before, he had stood. Not a moment too soon had he leaped.

Motionless he stood there, waiting in tense expectation. What would happen next, he had not the



least idea, but he couldn't prevent his imagination from running riot.

He hadn't long to wait before his watching was rewarded. A few minutes after the pit appeared, he heard a loud, high-pitched whir coming from the heart of the meteor. As it grew louder, it assumed a higher and still higher key, finally rising above the range of human ears. And at that moment the strange vehicle arose to the surface.

A simple-appearing mechanism was the car, consisting of a twelve-foot sphere of the same bronze-like metal that made up the meteor, with a huge wheel, like a bronze cincture, around its middle. It was the whirling of this great wheel that had caused the high-pitched whirring. The entire, strange machine was surrounded by a peculiar green radiance, a radiance that seemed to crackle ominously as the sphere hovered over the mouth of the pit.

For a moment the car hung motionless, then it drifted slowly to the surface of the meteor, landing a few feet

away from Parkinson. Hastily he drew back from the greenly phosphorescent thing—but not before he had experienced an unpleasant prickling sensation over his entire body.

As the bacteriologist drew away, there was a sharp, audible click within the interior of the sphere; and the green radiance vanished. At the same moment, three heavy metal supports sprang from equi-distant points in the sides of the car, and held the sphere in a balanced position on the rounded top of the meteor.

There was a soft, grating sound on the opposite side of the car. Quickly, Parkinson circled it—and stopped short in surprise.

Men were descending from an opening in the side of the sphere! Parkinson had reasoned that since the meteor had come from the depths of space, any being in its interior, unnatural as that seemed, would have assumed a form quite different from the human. Of course, conditions on Earth could be approximated on another planet. At any rate, whatever the explanation, the sphere was emitting men!

They were men—but there was something queer about them. They were very tall—seven feet or more—and very thin; and their skins were a delicate, transparent white. They looked rather ghostly in their tight-fitting white suits. It was not this that made them seem queer, however: it was an indefinite something, a vague suggestion of heartless inhumanity, of unearthliness, that was somehow repulsive and loathsome.

There were three of them, all very similar in appearance and bearing. Their surprise at the sight of Parkinson, if anything, was greater than the start their appearance had given him. He, at least, had expected to see beings of some sort, while the three had been taken completely by surprise.

For a moment they surveyed him with staring, cold-blue eyes. Then Parkinson extended his hand, and as cordially as he could, exclaimed:

"Hello! Welcome to Earth!"

The visitors from space ignored his advances and continued staring at him. Their attitude at first was quizzical, speculative, but slowly a hostile expression crept into their eyes.

Suddenly, with what seemed like common consent, they faced each other, and conversed in low tones in some unintelligible tongue. For almost a minute they talked, while Parkinson watched them in growing apprehension.

Finally they seemed to have reached some definite conclusion; with one accord they turned and moved slowly toward the bacteriologist, something distinctly menacing in their attitudes. The men from the meteor were tall, but they were thin; Parkinson, too, was large, and his six-foot length was covered with layers of solid muscle. As the three advanced toward him, he doubled his fists, and crouched in readiness for the expected attack.

They were almost upon him when he leaped into action. A crushing left to his stomach sent the first one to the meteor-top, where he lay doubled up in

pain. But that was the only blow that Parkinson struck; in a moment he found himself lying prone upon his back, utterly helpless, his body completely paralyzed. What they had done to him, he did not know; all that he could remember was two thin bodies twining themselves around him—a sharp twinge of pain at the base of his skull; then absolute helplessness.

One of the tall beings grasped Parkinson about the waist, and with surprising strength, threw him over his shoulder. The other assisted his groaning fellow. When the latter had recovered to some extent, the three ascended the ladder that led into the metal sphere.

The interior of the strange vehicle, as far as Parkinson could see, was as simple as its exterior. There was no intricate machinery of any sort in the square room; probably what machinery there was lay between the interior and exterior walls of the sphere. As for controls, these consisted of several hundred little buttons that studded one of the walls.

When they entered the vehicle, Parkinson was literally, and none too gently, dumped upon the floor. The man who had carried him stepped over to the controls. Like those of a skilled typist, his long, thin fingers darted over the buttons. In a moment the sphere was in motion.

There were no more thrills for Parkinson in that ride than he would have derived from a similar ride in an elevator. They sank very slowly for some minutes, it seemed to him; then they stopped with a barely noticeable jar.

The door of the car was thrust aside by one of the three, and Parkinson was borne from the sphere. A bright, coppery light flooded the interior of the meteor, seeming to radiate from its walls. In his helpless state, and in the awkward position in which he was carried, with his head close to the floor, he could see little of the room through which they passed, in spite of the light. Later, however, he learned that it was circular in shape, and about twice the diameter of the cylindrical tube that led into it. The wall that bound this chamber was broken at

regular intervals by tall, narrow, doorways, each leading into a different room.

Parkinson was carried into one of these, and was placed in a high-backed metal chair. After he had been strapped fast, one of the men placed his hands at the base of the bacteriologist's skull; he felt a sudden twinge of pain; and his strange paralysis left him suddenly.

He knew it was useless to struggle; without resisting, he let them place upon his head a cap-like device that seemed lost in a tangled maze of machinery. Each meteor-man grasped one of the instruments resembling old-time radio head-phones that were fastened to Parkinson's head-gear, and clamped it over his ears.

The bacteriologist heard a steady, humming drone, like a swarm of angry bees—felt a peculiar, soothing warmth about his head; and then he slept.

Only a moment or two seemed to have passed when he awoke. The strange device on his head was

removed and put away; and then, to Parkinson's amazement, one of the three men, evidently the leader, spoke—in English!

"Now that you have recovered consciousness," he remarked in a cold, expressionless voice, "you had better realize at the very beginning that you are completely in our power. Any effort to escape will be futile, for there is only one way to reach the outside; the opening through the top; and only one means of travel through that opening: the sphere. And since you know nothing about the operation of the machine, any attempt to run it would be disastrous to you.

"If you promise to refrain from violence, we'll release you, and give you some measure of freedom. We'll do this because you can be of assistance to us in one of our tasks here on your planet."

Parkinson assented readily; he knew he could gain nothing by rejecting their offer. "Of course I'll promise. But—but, how did you learn English?" he asked in bewilderment.



"You taught us," the leader replied. "That device we placed upon your head created a duplicate of your knowledge in our minds. We knew your language, your world, indeed, yourself, as well as you do."

Parkinson shook his head in amazement. Another question came to his mind as the men released him. He was interrupted before he could give it expression.

"Don't ask," the leader exclaimed. "I'll tell our entire story so that you'll have no occasion to annoy us with your questions.

"We're Venerians," he began, "inhabitants of the planet you call Venus. For ages our world has been overcrowded. A short time ago, the conditions became so acute that something had to be done. It was suggested that we seek another habitable planet to which our people could migrate.

"Your Earth was thought to be the world with physical conditions most closely resembling those of Acor, or Venus. Our scientists set to work immediately, using forces and devices with which you are totally

unfamiliar, and constructed several missiles which they hurled at Earth. These missiles, spherical masses closely resembling meteors, were set to explode after a certain period of contact with an atmosphere similar to our own. By their explosion we on Venus could determine whether or not this world had a breathable atmosphere.

"Upon our deciding that the Earth was habitable, we built this great machine. It is chiefly composed of our greatest heat-resister, a metal we call thoque; I see no corresponding word in your vocabulary; evidently you are unfamiliar with the element, or else it is unknown on Earth.

"After our flight through space, automatically controlled, by the way, on Venus, we landed here. With our thoque disintegrator, we bored a passageway to the surface of this great sphere. Then we entered the car, rose to the top of the passageway, and discovered you.

"That is a brief synopsis of our actions—and it must suffice! Ask no questions; we do not wish to be

disturbed by the blind gropings of your primitive mind!"

There was a cold finality in the Venerian's voice that convinced Parkinson that for the moment, at least, he had better forget the many questions that had surged up in his mind.

The Venerian leader spoke again. "From our observations of your mind, we know that you have not had food or water for a rather lengthy period of time. It is not our purpose to starve you: you shall eat and drink."

A minute later Parkinson sat at a very high table in one of the rooms, drinking water from Venus, and eating the fare of an alien world.

Days passed by, merging into weeks, while Parkinson lost all track of time. The bacteriologist's existence became a ceaseless round of toil. The Venerian had said that he would be given some measure of freedom, because he would be of use to them; he had

not been with them long ere he learned what that use was.

One of the rooms was filled with great slabs of thoque; it was Parkinson's task to carry the slabs to the vehicle at the base of the shaft, one by one; to rise to the surface with them, accompanied by two of the men—the third was working on the surface—and there unload them. Day after day this continued.

Hope of escaping was almost dead in Parkinson's breast, because he was constantly under the surveillance of those hard, blue eyes. Only one thing kept hope alive: by watching the Venerians operate the car, he was slowly gaining a knowledge of the meaning of the many buttons in the wall. Some day, if an opportunity came, he meant to be ready to take advantage of it.

Once, shortly after his monotonous toil began, Parkinson experienced a great flare of hope for deliverance. They had just brought another slab to the surface, when a steamer appeared above the horizon.

It was far away, but its crew must surely have seen the island.

But his expectations were short-lived. One of the three drew from beneath his tight-fitting, white garments a little, metal object, a long tube, with a handle at one end, and pointed it at the vessel. For a moment he held it thus, moving it slowly backward and forward: then he returned it to its place of concealment, and turned away with an air of indifference. And Parkinson saw the ship burst suddenly into flame, a few minutes later to sink beneath the waves.

Shaken to the depths of his being, Parkinson resumed his work. The inhumanity of these saturnine Venerians filled him with a dread so great that he refused to admit it to himself. That that had not been the first time that they had destroyed a ship, he felt sure; his heart sank, and grew more hopeless.

At last his task of carrying slabs was finished. The room was empty, and the work completed. A great tower, entirely covering the island, reared its head

into the sky. In appearance, it resembled a very tall lighthouse. This resemblance held true only until its top was reached; there it ended. From the tower's top extended four long, hollow arms, so constructed that they whirled about the tower at a mad pace when the machinery with which they were connected was started. In addition, arrangement was made for a powerful blast of air to be sent through the tubes when the Venerians so desired.

What the purpose of this great edifice was, Parkinson could not guess: later, he learned the horrible significance of it all.

After the tower was finished, the bacteriologist was left to his own devices to a great extent, though always closely watched by one of his captors. They let him eat all the food he desired, and let him lie around as much as he wished, regaining his health and strength. This was a pleasant surprise for him: he took full advantage of his privileges.

Then, one day when Parkinson had fully recovered from the effects of his grueling labors, the leader of

the Venerians approached him from behind, and before he could raise a hand in defense, had rendered him helplessly paralyzed.

"You will now be given a second opportunity to help the cause of Venus on Earth," he said in his expressionless voice. And so saying, he lifted Parkinson, and bore him into one of the rooms.

### **Chapter 3**

At no time while he was held captive by the Venerians was Parkinson as hopeless, or as completely filled with despair as when he was carried into this room. There was something depressing about the chamber, something that gripped his heart with the chill hand of dread. He had a feeling of impending evil.

The few momentary glimpses of the chamber that he had gotten while he was being carried, sufficed to convince Parkinson that this was a laboratory, or—he shuddered at the thought—an operating room. The walls, floor and ceiling were composed of a white porcelainlike substance: from these walls, strangely, streamed the same coppery light that filled the entire meteor.

Entirely concealing one wall was a long, glass case, constructed to form countless little niches, each of which held a small, transparent vessel. At the back of the room was a high table, covered with transparent cases which were filled with complex instruments of



every description, some similar to those on Earth; others entirely different.

The thing that brought the thought of an operating room to Parkinson's mind was the long, white slab that rested on metal uprights in the room's center—an operating table. A moment after they entered the room, he had his theory substantiated: the Venerian leader placed him on the white slab, stretching him to full length. It was an operating table—and he was to be the subject of their operation!

He had lain there but a moment when two of the Venerians approached, one on either side, and began removing his clothing. It was not long before he lay on the cold slab, entirely nude.

While he was being stripped, he heard the leader of the Venerians moving about, heard the click of glass, the rasp of metal upon metal. But, unable to move his eyes, he had seen none of his activities, except to note that several of the little vessels had been taken from their resting places.

When the two had finished disrobing him, and had replaced him upon his back, the leader appeared. He looked down at Parkinson, a queer expression in his hard, blue eyes. He seemed to hesitate a moment: then he spoke.

"Earthling," he said in his toneless voice, "I have decided to tell you of our intentions. You are going to play a very important part in our scheme, and it is only fitting that you should know. You can do nothing to hinder our plans: you are giving us incalculable aid: and it affords me some degree of satisfaction to tell you this.

"As you know, Earthling, we purpose to have the people of Acor to come to Earth to live, to relieve the congested conditions of our own world. Obviously, there is no room for two types of intelligent beings on one planet—your race must go! It is our intention to destroy all human life on Earth!

"We intend accomplishing this with Venerian microbes. From the record of your knowledge, I've learned that diseases of various kinds are common on

Earth. We expected that such would be the case, and thus, you would not be immune to germs, so we came prepared. Each of the small compartments in that case that you may have seen, contains a culture of a different germ. After we have determined which Venerian bacilli will be the most effective, we will develop them in great quantities, and loose them upon your world.

"In the selecting process, you will play your part. Since our germs may have a different effect upon your bodies than they do upon Venerians, we will inoculate you with different diseases, and watch their effects upon you.

"Of course, you yourself will be in no great danger, for we will have the diseases under our constant control. On Acor we have abolished disease entirely, having a reagent or an antitoxin for every malady; we will use our cures upon you immediately after we have seen how you react to each disease.

"What we desire is a bacillus that will take effect when it is breathed in through the lungs. If the

disease is of such a nature as to instill fear in the minds of observers, so much the better; but that is unnecessary. When we discover a microbe of that nature, we will be ready to act.

"By the way, our work has been lessened to a great degree by the fact that you are a bacteriologist. The knowledge we gain from you has enabled us to eliminate at least half of our microbes. All Venerian germs that are duplicated on Earth will be left out of our calculations. Only those unknown to your planet will be tried upon you."

When the Venerian had finished his explanation, each word of which had sounded like a death knell to Parkinson, the bacteriologist lay on the slab in the grip of a nightmare of horror. The cold-blooded brutality of these Venerian beasts, and the thought of lying there helpless with his body the prey of unknown diseases, filled him with a maddening fear and dread.

Mightily he struggled to break the uncanny bonds that held him paralyzed, but it was of no avail. His body retained its helpless rigidity.

Only for a moment was Parkinson left to his fearful musings; then the Venerians begin their work. A tall table on wheels was brought from somewhere, and drawn to the side of the slab. Upon this various instruments were placed, side by side with numerous flat vessels containing germ cultures. Parkinson saw none of this, but from the sounds that came to his ears he could infer what was taking place.

Finally, everything seemed to be in readiness. The Venerian leader bent over Parkinson for a moment: and the latter felt a sharp pain in his side. Then the Venerian withdrew.

Slowly, interminably, the time dragged by while the microbes that had been introduced into his body were at their work. How long he lay there with the Venerians watching, he could not tell, but it seemed to be hours. During that time he felt himself gripped by an increasingly violent fever. Unbearable heat

flooded his body. And because of his helplessness, he could do nothing to relieve his pain and discomfort. It was maddening!

When he thought he had reached the limit of his endurance, and felt that he would go insane in another moment, the Venerian leader injected something into his side. He became aware of an immediate sense of relief; in an unbelievably short time the fever had left him and he was himself again.

There followed for Parkinson hours of nightmare agony, while the Venerians experimented with his living body. Time after time he was inoculated with strange bacilli that wracked him with tortures indescribable. Hideous diseases covered him with festering sores; twisted his flesh into a repellent mass of scars; left him weakened and deformed. Had it not been for the incredible curative powers of the Venerians, he would have died then; but always, when the end seemed at hand, they brought him back to life, only to subject him to other horrors.

After what seemed countless ages, the Venerians left him alone. Under the powerful effects of their cures, Parkinson began to recover. Hope welled up in his heart; perhaps the terrible experiments were ended.

When he was almost certain that the torture was over, his hopes were suddenly destroyed. The three Venerians approached again, each bearing a number of vessels containing germ cultures. These they placed on the table at Parkinson's side; then two of them withdrew, leaving the leader to continue his work. Uttering a few words in the Venerian tongue, he occupied himself with something on the table, and a moment later turned toward the bacteriologist, a long needle in his hands.

Parkinson felt a great burning pain in his left arm, as though a searing, hot needle had been thrust into his flesh. In a moment this vanished. Then a feeling of irresistible lassitude overwhelmed him; an unbearable weariness filled him with longing for rest, peace—death. This, too, was of short duration.

With the passing of the weariness, Parkinson became aware of a sharp throbbing in his arm. Rapidly this increased in violence, until suddenly an unbearable, excruciating agony seized him. Far greater was this than any pain he had suffered before. For a moment he struggled to scream, to move, to do anything to relieve his agony. There seemed to be a sudden snap—a cry of anguish burst from his lips—and his senses left him. Just as the bonds of paralysis had broken, he had lost consciousness.

Life returned to Parkinson very slowly. In a daze he stared around, uncomprehending. Then suddenly he realized that he was no longer paralyzed: nor was he in the operating room. The bed on which he lay was soft, comfortable; the room, unfamiliar. But not for long did his mind dwell upon this; in a few moments his eyelids closed, and he slept the sleep of complete mental and physical exhaustion.

During the weeks that followed, Parkinson did little other than sleep. Occasionally he arose, either to stretch himself, or to secure food, but for the greater part of the time he remained in bed. His body was a



mere shadow of its former self as the result of his terrible experience on the white slab: his incessant sleeping, necessary because of his weakened condition, served to bring him back to his former health. The Venerians seemed glad to have it thus: asleep, he did not disturb their activities.

When he had awakened from his first period of natural slumber, he had received a terrible shock. His left arm was gone, amputated at the shoulder. Strangely, the wound had healed while he slept, probably the result of the Venerian doctoring, so there was no pain: but the shock had been terrible.

After he had recovered from the effects of that shock, he had resolved to make the Venerians pay for what they had done. And then he had realized that the inhuman brutes must be destroyed for a greater reason: unless he interfered, he believed that they would carry out their intention of destroying all human life.

As the weeks passed by, while strength was returning to Parkinson, he learned in a general way what the

invaders were doing. They were engaged in developing vast quantities of microbes to be spread over Earth. When these were ready, a great amount of fine dust that the Venerians had brought with them, was impregnated with the bacilli. This was then taken up into the tower, where, as Parkinson learned later, it was blown out through the four tubes that spun around the tower's top, to drift through the air—to enter human bodies—to destroy life.

The Venerians worked with the cultures and impregnated dust without protection of any sort: evidently they were immune to the disease. Later Parkinson learned that he was likewise immune; they had rendered him so after trying the germs upon him.

Gradually the bacteriologist's health returned—so gradually that his captors seemed not to notice it. He was glad of this, for their vigilance had relaxed, and he did not want it renewed. Even when he was as strong and well as ever, he spent much time in bed, shamming illness. And when he could do so without danger of detection, he kept a close watch upon the

three, waiting for a time when he would be entirely alone.

At last his opportunity came. The three Venerians rose to the surface together, leaving him in his room, to all outward appearances, asleep. But sleep was far from him at that moment; he had been watching.

Shortly after the sphere had vanished up the shaft, Parkinson emerged from his room. For a moment he surveyed the circle of doors: then he shrugged his shoulders. They all looked alike to him. Quickly he crossed the room, and pressed a button that mechanically opened a door. It was his purpose, first of all, to secure a weapon; one room would do as well as another for a beginning.

At first glance Parkinson was struck by the strange familiarity of this chamber: then, after a moment, he recognized it. A tall, high-backed metal chair in its center was its mark of identification. This was the chamber wherein the Venerians had transferred a record of his knowledge to their minds.

Carefully he looked around in search of a weapon, but the room held nothing but the chair and the thought transference device. In a moment he withdrew, closing the door behind him.

In the next room he entered, he was fortunate. This chamber was filled with strange devices of various kinds. While curiously inspecting the intricate machines, he saw something that brought a smile of satisfaction to his lips.

Against one wall stood a tall, glass case, one of the shelves of which held several metal devices that Parkinson immediately recognized as being the Venerians' weapons. Poignantly he remembered how a similar device had destroyed a ship.

Leaving the door slightly ajar, he crossed to the case and secured one of the weapons. For a moment he studied it. There was nothing complex about the mechanism; a cursory examination sufficed to reveal how it was operated. Pressure on a little knob at the back of the handle released the devastating ray.

He was about to slip the device into his pocket when he stiffened involuntarily. There was a sound of movement outside the room—he heard a step on the metal floor—then he whirled.

One of the Venerians stood in the doorway, a menacing frown on his face. He was crouching, ready to spring upon Parkinson.

Quick as thought, the bacteriologist leveled his newly-acquired weapon, and pressed on the knob. There was a sudden spurt of flame from the Venerian's body; then it crumpled, sagging, shrinking together.

Hastily Parkinson released the pressure on the little knob, aghast at the destructive power of his little weapon. Then, as he remembered the torture he had endured at their hands, he directed the ray upon the ashes, until they, too, were consumed, leaving naught but a dark patch on the floor.

For several minutes Parkinson stood there in deep thought. There was no immediate danger from the two remaining Venerians, for they were up in the

tower, while the sphere was in the meteor; so he could think with utmost safety. Deep thought and careful planning were necessary now, for he had taken the step that must mean either his death or the death of the Venerians.

Suddenly he leaped into action; he had decided upon his next move. Crossing to the case he secured another weapon. He wasn't sure that they could be effectively discharged without re-loading; handicapped as he was with one arm gone, he had to be certain of the reliability of his means of defense. Then he left the room, and crossed to the huge thoque sphere.

It was the work of a moment to enter this, and prepare to ascend. This done, he turned his attention to the numerous knobs on the wall. He had not seen them for quite a while; it was with difficulty that he recalled which knobs controlled the car's ascent. At last, hesitantly, but correctly, he pressed on the knobs, and the sphere rose slowly toward the surface.

At the proper moment, Parkinson, brought the vehicle to a halt, and slid back the door. Furtively he peered around. The Venerians were on the other side of the tower. Quickly he lowered the ladder and descended.

As he stepped to the floor, a sudden cry of dismay fell upon his ears. One of the Venerians, coming around the car, had discovered him. Without a moment's hesitation, Parkinson aimed his little weapon, and pressed upon the knob. Like his fellow, the Venerian fell to the floor, a heap of charred ashes.

With the second Venerian destroyed, Parkinson dashed around the sphere, metal cylinder held in readiness. The leader of the Venerians was stealing stealthily around the other side of the car, his hand fumbling beneath his garment.

"Stop!" Parkinson cried. "Raise your hands above your head—empty!" A cylinder clattered to the metal floor as the Venerian's hands moved skyward.

"Keep your back turned!" Parkinson snapped as the invader began about. "I won't hesitate to press on this

little knob, at your first hostile move! I'd thoroughly enjoy burning you to a crisp, so be very careful."

While talking, Parkinson had moved slowly toward the man from Venus; now, almost upon him, he quickly dropped his weapon into a pocket, and swung a terrible blow at the base of his skull. The Venerian fell to the floor without a groan, unconscious.

Parkinson stared at the recumbent figure rather dubiously for a moment. If only he had his other arm! But it was gone; with an impatient shake of his head he stooped and raised the senseless invader.

It was anything but an easy task for the bacteriologist to carry his seven-foot burden up the ladder and into the sphere, but finally, he succeeded in doing so. Then, without delay, he lowered the car into the meteor again.

As he bore the Venerian from the vehicle, he tried to decide upon his next move. Obviously, he had to secure the one surviving invader, so that he would not be a menace to Parkinson when he revived. And then



the logical thing to do would be, in some way, to secure information from him as to how to cure the disease that was spreading over the world.

The logical thing to do, yes—but how? With only one arm, the simple task of binding the Venerian presented considerable difficulty. How much more difficult would it be to force anything from him?

Then the solution of the first problem presented itself to Parkinson. What was to prevent his strapping this being into the high-backed chair to which he had been secured some time before? Quickly he crossed the circular room to the door he had first passed through while searching for a weapon.

Ten minutes later, when the Venerian regained his senses, he was fastened securely to the tall, metal chair.

"Well," Parkinson addressed him, "conditions seem to be reversed now, and you're the underdog. I've nipped your invasion in the bud. All your elaborate preparations are wasted."

Something resembling a sneer wreathed the Venerian's thin lips; a mocking gleam lit his cold, blue eyes.

"So our efforts have been wasted, have they? I'm afraid I can't agree with you. Already, enough bacteria have been released to destroy all life, though it will take longer than we desire. Even though you kill me, our goal will still be reached. The human race will die!"

A cloud of gloom fell upon Parkinson. He had expected this; but he had been hoping that he was wrong.

"Then there's only one thing for me to do, and that is: I'll have to force you to tell me how to undo the damage you've done."

The Venerian smiled mirthlessly. "You have absolutely no chance of accomplishing that," he said. "We've done our work too well to allow any interference now.

"You do not know this, but we have released upon your world the worst malady ever known to Venus. There is only one remedy; and I'm the only one who knows it, or who has the means wherewith to accomplish it. And I certainly won't tell!"

The worried expression on Parkinson's face increased in intensity. There was something in the Venerian's voice that convinced him that he meant what he said.

Then suddenly his countenance cleared, and a happy smile replaced his frown.

"Perhaps you won't tell, but I think you will. There are more ways than one of forcing you."

Parkinson had hit upon a solution to his problem. The Venerians had reproduced his knowledge in their brains; why wouldn't it be possible for him to reverse the operation?

In a moment he secured the thought-transference apparatus from a case in the rear of the room, and bore it to the chair, and in spite of the Venerian

leader's struggles, placed it upon his head. He put the head-phones over his own ears, and began fumbling with the controls.

Suddenly he seemed to strike the right combination. There was a faint, humming drone in his ears; after a moment this was replaced by a loud crackling—and the knowledge of the man from Venus was becoming his own.

Somewhat dazed, Parkinson shut off the current. His mind was in a turmoil. He was in possession of knowledge of such an amazing character that, for the moment he had lost his mental equilibrium. Indeed, so strange was his new-found knowledge, that he could not grasp the significance of even half of the facts in his mind.

But already, he knew how, with animal electricity, they had paralyzed him; knew what had happened to him on the operating table; knew the nature of the dread disease that destroyed his arm; the Gray Plague—and knew the cure!

A sudden thought arrested this review of his new knowledge. The Gray Plague! At that very moment incalculable quantities of the deadly bacilli were being cast into the air. And he was doing nothing about it!

He glanced at the Venerian. He was still unconscious, and would remain so for some minutes to come. And even if he did recover his senses, he was securely fastened to the chair; Parkinson dashed out of the room, crossed to the sphere, and passed through the open doorway.

Without hesitation he manipulated the controls, directed by his Venerian knowledge. Rapidly the sphere rose to the surface.

As it came to rest on the floor of the tower, Parkinson sprang from the car, and headed toward a mass of intricate machinery that filled fully a quarter of the great building.

Even this caused him no great concern; he was as familiar with it as he would have been had he

constructed it. For some moments he was busy with numerous dials and levers; then the release of the germs was stopped.

Parkinson spent several minutes in examining the contents of the tower, his Earthly mind lost in wonder at the strange things his Venerian knowledge revealed to him. Then he entered the sphere again, and sank into the meteor.

As he moved toward the room that held the Venerian, his mind was busy with conjectures as to what he would do with his prisoner. It was necessary for the bacteriologist to reach the mainland as quickly as possible, and make use of his knowledge of the cure for the Gray Plague. He didn't want to kill the man; he couldn't free him; yet if he left him strapped to the chair, he'd surely die of starvation.

Still undecided, he thrust open the door. With a startled gasp he stopped short. Somehow the Venerian had freed himself; at that moment he leaped toward Parkinson.

Instinctively the bacteriologist flung up his hand in a defensive attitude. The onrushing Venerian caught Parkinson's out-thrust fist in the pit of his stomach, and doubled up in pain. While he was thus defenseless, Parkinson placed a well-directed blow on the side of the Venerian's jaw, a blow carrying every ounce of his strength.

So great was the force of the punch, that it lifted the man from Venus and cast him headlong upon the floor. His head landed with a sickening thud. Unmoving, he lay where he had fallen.

Parkinson knelt over him for a moment, then arose. Without question, the man was dead. The Venerian had solved the bacteriologist's last problem; he was free to return to the United States with his means of saving mankind.

Drawing the little metal cylinder from his pocket, he burned the body of the Venerian leader to a heap of ashes, ridding the world of the last invader. Then he turned and entered the glass-lined operating room.

Following the dictates of his Venerian knowledge, he crossed to one of the walls, and drew therefrom a flat, glass vessel, somewhat like a petri dish. This contained bacteria that were harmless in themselves, and were hostile to those of the Gray Plague. These germs, brought from Venus, were the only cure for the terrible disease.

The work of the English bacteriologist Twort, in 1915, and the Frenchman, d'Herelle, in 1917, brought to the attention of the scientific world the fact that many bacteria are subject to attack and destruction by some unknown active agent with which they are associated in infected material. This agent, whatever its character, changed growing germ cultures to a dead, glassy substance.

Twort advanced the thought that the agent might be a living, filtered virus, although he favored the theory that it was an enzyme derived from the bacteria themselves.



D'Herelle, on the contrary, believed that this phenomenon was due to a living, multiplying, ultra-microscopic microbe that destroyed certain bacteria.

Evidence favoring both theories has come to light, with the result that, at present, controversy is rife. Up to date, the contention of neither side has been proved.

Parkinson's adventure was almost at an end. He had not emerged unscathed, but he had won!

The details of his further actions need not be recorded. Suffice it to say that he entered the sphere, carrying his precious, curative germs, arose to the top of the tower, and passed through a round opening in its side. His borrowed knowledge revealed that the car possessed abilities that he had not suspected; with amazing speed he caused it to flash across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States.

There he saw the frightful carnage that the Plague had caused, saw the deserted cities—and was filled with self-reproach because he had not acted sooner.

Across the miles and miles of deserted country he sped, following the fleeing hordes, finally passing over the stragglers and landing in the heart of the congested areas. After making a few inquiries, he returned to the sphere, and continued on toward the West. He landed, finally, outside the city of San Francisco.

A short time later, twisted, deformed, yet triumphant, he was ushered into the presence of the United States government as—the man who had saved the human race.

## Chapter 4

The terrible days of the Gray Plague ended in mystery. Much that had puzzled the world, Parkinson, with his Venerian knowledge, explained; but there was one thing, the final, enigmatical act in the strange drama, that was as much of a mystery to him as it was to the rest of the world.

Enigma! Of what significance, of what portent—who could tell?

When the great vessel from the United States, equipped to destroy the meteor of the Venetians, neared the great thoque sphere, they came upon a scene quite different from what they had expected. Parkinson, who was on the ship, was more surprised than the rest, for he had definite knowledge of what, in the natural course of events, they should see. For the others there was nothing so very strange in what they saw; Parkinson had lied, that was all.

When the bacteriologist had left the meteor, there had been a high, bronze-colored tower, a burnished

lighthouse, covering its entire top. It had been there—but now it was gone! Only the jagged, arched surface of the meteor remained.

They lowered boats and rowed to the strange island. There they saw something that filled them—Parkinson especially—with a very definite uneasiness. The entire top of the meteor was a twisted, fire-blasted mass of bronze-like metal. Where the tower had been, where the shaft had led into the remarkable interplanetary vehicle, there was now a broken expanse of thoque that flashed fire under the rays of the sun.

Something seemed to have melted, to have fused the tower, until it had crumpled, and had run, filling the entrance of the meteor. There was irrefutable evidence to that effect; no one thought otherwise.

But what agency had done this strange thing?

Someone suggested that it might have been the work of some prearranged mechanism. Parkinson shook his head. Had such been the case, his Venerian knowledge would have told him so.

Obviously, nothing of Earth had done it, nothing of Earth—then something of Venus! Inconclusive conjecture, perhaps, but no other explanation offered itself. Something had sealed the contents of the meteor from the sight of man, something with a purpose. From Venus? The thought was logical, to say the least.

Not for long did they remain there beside the Venerian vehicle; there was naught for them to do, so they turned about and headed toward the United States. They bore tidings that were vaguely disturbing, tidings that none were glad to hear. For, according to all indications, something alien to Earth was still within her confines.

Behind it all—the meteors, the Plague, the sealing of the Venerian vehicle—is one fact of great significance. No longer is man alone in the universe; no longer is he in isolation! Out of space came a menace, an intelligence striving to wrest from him his right to rule over Earth. No longer can man in his smug complacency think of himself as being secure in his

strength. He has been shown the utter folly of such thinking.

The menace—the invaders from Venus—came, and were destroyed, their purposes defeated. Yet—in the vast reaches of space, in worlds of other dimensions, in the cosmic crucible of life that embodies all creation, there may be other forms of life, other menaces, hovering clouds of death, preparing to sweep down upon Earth to snuff out her life. Who can tell?

And who may say that man is free from the Venerian danger? The strange sealing of the meteor implies that the menace is still present. Who knows but what those inhuman Venerian brutes may even now be planning some new invasion, may be preparing to renew their attack upon Earth?

Time alone will tell.